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ABSTRACT

A guide to several hundred common American idioms and slang phrases such as "to get something straight," "to mooch," and "in the bag" provides definitions, examples of usage, variations, and explanations when appropriate. A list of common abbreviations, such as "ASAP," and their referents is also included. (MSE)

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ADVANCED AMERICAN IDIOMS

A GUIDE TO EVERYDAY USAGE

bite off more than one can chew

EDWARD JAY ALLAN, PH.D.

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Advanced American Idioms
A Guide to Everyday Usage

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Introduction

A major problem facing many students of English is the great number of idiomatic expressions that Americans use in everyday conversation - at school, on the job, on TV, radio, etc. Many of these idioms are not found in any textbook or in the standard guides to idioms, many come from sports which may be unfamiliar to the learner, and many may not be at all complimentary to the person referred to! Furthermore, in the course of time, new expressions keep coming into the language while others drop out. Very often, a non-native speaker may know the meaning of each part of the idiom, but not be able to understand the expression as a whole.

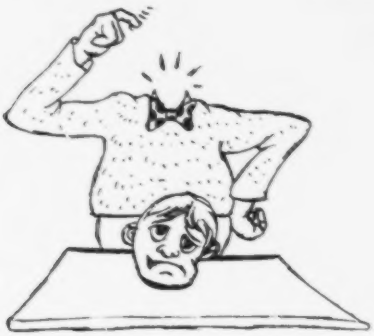
A few words about this book: Purpose This guide is intended to be used as a reference work rather than a text; I would not suggest that a student sit down to try to memorize the contents. Sources The expressions included here come from a number of sources: idioms I find myself using, idioms brought in for explanation by my students, those found in a number of newspapers, magazines, and professional journals, others contributed by colleagues, and many collected as the result of listening to hour after hour of recordings of radio talk shows and unrehearsed meetings, discussions, conferences, etc. on a range of subjects. Organization In general, expressions have been listed by first significant word - for example, "red herring" is listed under "red," not "herring," and "face the music" is listed under "face." Exclusions Obviously, every idiom found could not be included; for convenience's sake, I have excluded common "two word verb" idioms; that is, I have left out "stand up," for example, in the meaning of "rise from a chair," but have included it in the meaning of "not show up for an appointment." I have also excluded most "four letter

words" and expressions which could serve to perpetuate ethnic stereotypes. I should add that the world view expressed in the examples is not necessarily my own!

Inspiration for this book came from the students in my Professional Communications for Foreign Engineers course, and I would like to thank all those others who have helped, either through contributions or through advice; my special thanks go to Edgar Sather, to Raoul Meilleur, and to Joe Lieberman, who also provided the art. Shortcomings, of course, are my own, and I welcome comments and suggestions from users to make subsequent editions even better.

E.J.A.
Boston, October, 1982

absent-minded - forgetful
He's so absent-minded that half the time he forgets his lunch at home.



absent-minded

ace in the hole/ace up one's sleeve [from cards] an asset or advantage, not known to other people, kept in reserve.
I know these arguments alone may not convince him, but my ace in the hole is that if he doesn't agree to give me a raise, I've already received a better offer from somebody else.

across the board - applying to everybody
Because business was bad, everybody had to take a 10% pay cut, across the board.

add apples and oranges - compare things which aren't in the same category.
Because they're not used for the same thing, comparing the fuel econ-omy of a moped and a trailer truck is like adding apples and oranges.

ahead of time - early
I had my paper ready ahead of time.

all chiefs and no Indians - all bosses and no workers
Everybody in that company is either a vice-president or a senior vice-president; they're all chiefs and no Indians.

(be) all ears - give full attention
What happened on your trip to Europe? I'm all ears.

all washed up - finished, unable to work any longer
Just because somebody is 65 doesn't mean that he's all washed up; many people can keep working effectively long after that, if they want.

all wet - completely wrong
That's the stupidest idea I've ever heard of, and if you think I'm going to go along with you, you're all wet.

cut the apron strings - grow up, mature
You're 28 years old; it's time you cut the apron strings and found an apartment of your own.

an arm and a leg - an awful lot of money
I wish I could afford an apartment downtown, but any place decent costs an arm and a leg.

an arm and a leg

armchair quarterback [from football] a individual who criticizes what someone else does without himself having any responsibility
It's easy to be an armchair quarterback; if you had to make the decisions yourself, you'd be a lot slower to knock what others do.

bad penny [originally, a counterfeit coin] undesirable person
His no-good brother turns up like a bad penny whenever he needs money.

in the bag - sure, definite
If I start my paper today, it'll be in the bag and ready by Friday.

bail out - rescue
Many Americans don't think that the taxpayers should bail out the automobile companies.

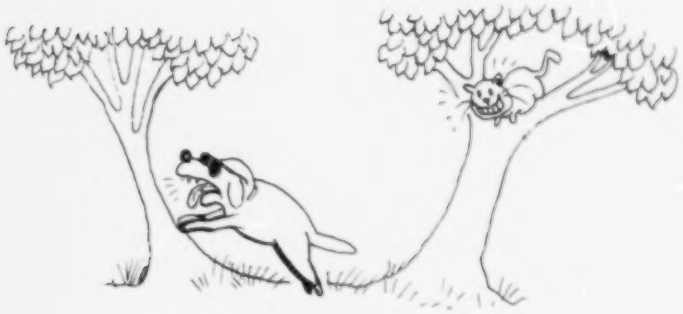
baker's dozen - thirteen (To prevent accusations of cheating, English bakers used to give their customers an ex.. a donut, etc.)
There weren't many people at the party, just a baker's dozen.

ball buster [slang, referring to the male genitalia] difficult work; work which requires a lot of attention
It's going to be a ball-buster getting my project finished on time because I haven't even started yet.

ball of fire - very hard worker
Jimmy's a regular ball of fire; it's almost impossible for anybody else to keep up with him.

ballpark figure [from baseball] a rough estimate, e.g., of price, time required, etc.
Can you give me a ballpark figure on how much it's going to cost to get my car fixed?

bark up the wrong tree - look in the wrong place
If you think you're going to get my car, you're barking up the wrong tree; nobody gets to use my car but me.



bark up the wrong tree

basket case [insult] an absolutely hopeless person or project
Bob's problems with his divorce have left him an emotional basket case.

be full of it [insult] think or talk nonsense
Mark claims his car gets 40 miles to the gallon, but I think he's full of it; I'd be surprised if it gets 30.

be game - be willing
You're all going out for pizza? Well, I'm game for a pepperoni and mushroom one.

be off - be spoiled
Don't drink that milk; I think it's off.

beachhead - launching point for an invasion
Before we can penetrate that market thoroughly, we have to establish a beachhead.

beat around the bush - avoid the heart of an issue,

frequently in order to be polite or not to hurt someone's feelings.

I need your honest opinion, Joe, so please don't beat around the bush. Do you think I'm making the right decision?

beat a dead horse - keep arguing about an issue that either can't be settled or had been settled long before.

Isn't arguing about who "started" the problems in the Middle East rather like beating a dead horse? I think we should be more concerned about how to resolve the problems now.

beat a dead horse

make a bee line for - go directly to

When he got to the party, Sam made a bee line for the food.

beef up - strengthen

The President says we must beef up our military forces.

beg off - decline an invitation with regrets

I wish I could go to the movie with you, but I'm afraid I have to beg off as my brother is in town.

(be) behind the eight-ball [from pool (billiards)]

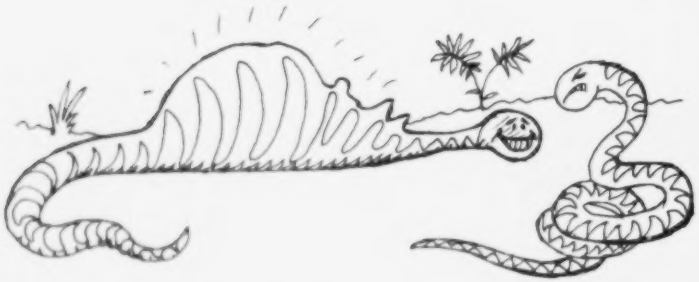
(get) the blame for something which has gone wrong
Because Marcia didn't give the boss the report on time, I'm afraid she's going to be behind the eight-ball because we couldn't do anything else til we got it.

be beside oneself - lose control of one's emotions
When Elaine heard about her mother's death, she was beside herself with grief.

belly up[1] [like a dead fish] go bankrupt, out of business
If Chrysler doesn't get the loan money it needs, it'll probably go belly up.

belly up[2] - come close to
Belly up to the bar! There's lots of beer for everybody.

bite off more than one can chew - take on too big a job
Marvin's ambitious, but I think this time he's bitten off more than he can chew.



bite off more than one can chew

bite the dust [colloq., from cowboy films] die, come to an end
It was a good idea, but because it would have cost

too much money, it bit the dust.

(go) on the blink - break down (of machinery)
I had to take the bus today because my car went on the blink.

blow it (one's money, savings, salary, etc.) **on** spend completely, often foolishly
Frank worked all winter and blew all his savings on a weekend in Las Vegas.

blow the whistle [from sports] report wrongdoing where one works to people in authority
When the manager's assistant found out that his boss was getting kickbacks, he blew the whistle on him to the company president and his boss got fired.

once in a blue moon - almost never
Once in a blue moon it gets very cold, but we almost always have warm weather.

blue pencil - edit
My English teacher **bluepencilled** half my essay.

(get) bogged down - (get) stuck
I understand the general approach, but I'm afraid that I'm getting bogged down in the details.

boil down to - mean
What his speech boils down to is that we're in for hard times.

boiler plate - routine copy for a document such as a proposal or insurance policy
Most of the provisions of the lease are just standard boiler plate, but you should read the section on security deposits carefully.

be booked solid - be completely sold out
I'm sorry, but that flight is booked solid; you'll have to pick a different date.

boom or bust - alternately very busy (rich, etc.) or very idle (poor, etc.), with few occasions in between
Our business is usually boom or bust; either we have more work than we can handle, or we have nothing to do at all, one or the other.

bone up on - study hard
With finals coming next week, I have to bone up on my physics; I haven't studied it much all semester.

bottom line [from accounting] final result or benefit
Your plan sounds good, but the bottom line is: "Will it bring us more business?"

bouncer - a person in a bar whose job is to throw out drunks, etc.
Mark's got a part-time job as a bouncer at the Last Chance Saloon.

brainstorm [noun or verb] (have) a sudden good idea
I just had a brainstorm; Larry's had this kind of problem before - why don't we ask him for his advice?

bread and butter - major source of income
While we make some money from translation work, our bread and butter is language teaching.

breadwinner - person who supports the family
Many families now have two breadwinners with both husbands and wives working.

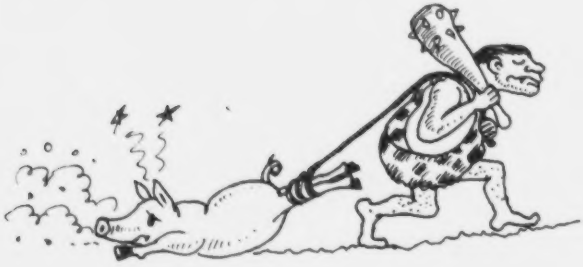
break even - neither gain nor lose money
I just about broke even on my trip to Las Vegas; I won at blackjack, but lost on the slot machines.

break ground - start a project, usually a building
The school broke ground on the new gym yesterday; it should be open early next year.

break in - train
His job is breaking in the new technicians in our methods.

breathe easily - relax
Now that I've turned in my paper, I can breathe easily.

bring home the bacon - be successful
I expected that some of our athletes would do well, but by setting so many world records, we really brought home the bacon.



bring home the bacon

brown bag[1] [verb] bring one's own lunch to work from home
Can you join us for lunch in the cafeteria today, Nancy, or are you brownbagging it?

brown bag[2] bring one's own beer or wine into a restaurant without a liquor license
The new French restaurant allows you to brown bag, but you have to pay a small "corkage fee" for the use of their glasses.

brown nose [noun or verb] flatter somebody, e.g., a teacher, boss in order to gain favorable attention
Pete thinks he can get a raise if he keeps on

brown-nosing his boss. Who knows? He may be right!

brush up on - review
Can you help me brush up on my French before my test on Friday?

brush up on

"The buck stops here." [A saying of Pres. Harry S Truman's] "I'm the one who has to make the final decision, and I'm the one who has to bear the ultimate responsibility."

bug[1] [noun or verb] (cause) a problem
Stop bugging me; I'll do it when I'm ready. We still have some bugs to get out of the computer program.

bug

bug[2] [noun or verb] (place) a hidden listening device or microphone
Richard Nixon bugged his own office.

bull session - general, unstructured discussion on a range of topics
Every so often we get together for a bull session and talk about everything, from the state of the economy to who makes the best pizza in town.

bum steer [from rodeo riding] bad advice
Of course you can trust me; have I ever given you a bum steer before?

burn the midnight oil - work very late
In order to get my term paper finished on time, I had to burn the midnight oil all last week.

on the back burner [from cooking] of low priority and able to be postponed
Finding a new apartment now has to be my first priority; planning my vacation for next summer has to sit on the back burner.

know which side one's bread is buttered on - know whom one must please
Don't expect him to back you up; he knows which side his bread is buttered on and he has to keep on the right side of his boss.

(be) bushed - be exhausted
After working all night on that project, I'm bushed and feel like I could sleep for a week.

butter up - flatter, compliment excessively
I don't think buttering up the professor will get you a better grade; he's just interested in your written work.

buy a pig in a poke - buy something, possibly of low quality, without examining it
Ordering something through the mail can be like

buying a pig in a poke; until it arrives, you don't really know what you've got.

buzz off [command] leave someone alone, stop annoying someone
Sue had to tell the drunk at the party to buzz off or else she'd slap him.

buzzword - a word or expression used to others think that one is up-to-date
This year's buzzword is "digital": digital clocks, digital microwave ovens, even digital pens.

do something up brown - do something in grand style, elegantly
When Sherry throws a party, she does it up brown - fine wine, gourmet food, the works.

carry - do someone's work for someone because the person is either incompetent or lazy
I'm tired of carrying Phil; I wish he'd do his own work for a change.

carry a torch - remain in love with someone long after an affair has ended
Rich and Carol broke up two months ago, but he's still carrying a torch for her.

cash in one's chips - collect one's profits
I've owned that building long enough; now it's gone up in value and it's time for me to cash in my chips.

--- [colloq.] die

Catch-22 [from Joseph Heller's novel of the same name] a "vicious circle"
Unfortunately, he's stuck in Catch-22: he can't get a job without experience, and he can't get experience without a job.

charley-horse - painful cramp in one's leg

Betty went jogging, but had to stop when she developed a bad charley-horse in her leg.

cheap shot - unnecessary comment intended to hurt someone's feelings
He knows perfectly well why he got fired, so it was just a cheap shot for you to remind him of it.

check out[1] - examine
Do you want me to check out your new car?

check out[2] - leave a hotel
We have to check out of the hotel by noon.

chew out - yell at
The sergeant chewed out the private for not making his bed properly.

when the chickens come home to roost - when the results of one's actions become clear
In the short term, this may be a good plan, but I'm afraid we'll find that when the chickens come home to roost, we've made a very, very bad mistake.

chicken out - refuse to do something because one feels it's too risky, at the risk of being criticized for cowardice
Thanks for the invitation to go hang-gliding, but I think I'm going to chicken out; I don't feel like jumping off the side of a mountain.

chicken out

chip in - contribute

When Wendy got married, all her co-workers chipped in $2 each to get her a present.

chuck out - throw out
When I moved, I had ten boxes of junk to chuck out.

circular file - waste basket
Junk mail goes into the circular file almost as soon as it's received.

cockamamie - ridiculous, absurd
Does Jim really expect us to believe his cockamamie story?

cock and bull story - unbelievable, probably untrue explanation
The landlord told me a cock and bull story about why we didn't have heat for three days.

cold feet - reluctance, unwillingness
I was thinking of buying a condo, but got cold feet when I found out how high interest rates were.

keep one's cool - remain calm, keep one's temper
Keep your cool! This isn't worth fighting over.

--- [opposite] lose one's cool

come by - find, get
Inexpensive apartments are hard to come by.

come a cropper - have severe and unexpected problems
Their client came a cropper when it tried to expand too quickly.

"It'll all **come out in the wash.**" - In the end, everything will be OK.
Don't worry about the mix up on your credit card; it'll all come out in the wash.

the coming thing - the most modern thing
Word processors are the coming thing in today's office; they're swiftly replacing typewriters.

con/con artist/con game [short for "confidence"] cheat others through misrepresentation/a cheat/the activity
Don't believe anything he tells you; that con artist is just out for your dough.

conk out - break down (machinery)
Her car conked out on the expressway and she couldn't get it started again.

cook someone's goose - punish somebody for trying to cheat
They were caught trying to pull a fast one, and now their goose is cooked.

cooped up - confined, like a chicken
Who wants to be cooped up indoors on a nice day like this?

cop out [noun or verb] (give) an evasive answer or explanation
You can't cop out on explaining a price increase of that size by blaming OPEC; that just won't wash.

corner the market - gain a monopoly
Some people may be rude, but George has certainly cornered the market on impoliteness. Speculators who cornered the market on silver caused a world-wide shortage.

cough up - give involuntarily
April 15th is the date that Americans have to cough up their income tax money.

count on - depend on
You can't count on him; he makes promises, but never carries them through.

cover one's ass [colloq.] protect oneself
Just in case something goes wrong, we have to figure out a way to cover our asses.

till the cows come home - for an indefinitely long period
You can complain till the cows come home, but it's not going to make a bit of difference.

creative bookkeeping - figuring out ways to adjust one's accounting practices to get around regulations, etc.
Paul's knowledge of creative bookkeeping has been the secret of his ability to get all the staffing he needs.

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it." We'll solve that problem when the time comes; it's too early now to worry about it.

cry wolf - give a false alarm
The politicians cried wolf about budget problems for so long that when the city really was broke, nobody believed them.

cry wolf

not someone's cup of tea - not somebody's preference
I'm glad you enjoy skiing, but I guess it's just not my cup of tea.

cut corners - do things the "easy way", regardless of whether it's the best way.
Frank tried to cut corners when he painted his room, but the results were so poor he had to do the whole job over again.

cut and dried - straightforward, routine
This job is cut and dried; I could do it in my sleep.

cut the mustard - be adequate
I'm sorry to have to tell you this, Joe, but your work just doesn't cut the mustard.

dead-end job - a job with no future
Paula's depressed because she's stuck in a dead-end job with no possibility of promotion.

dead ringer - complete look-alike
Although they're not related, Bob is a dead ringer for Phil, and most people think they're brothers.

deep-six [noun or verb, from sailing] bury or dispose of an unwanted idea, etc.
The boss didn't like Steve's idea so he deep-sixed it.

devil's advocate - a person whose job is to find flaws in an idea or product in order to improve it
I may be playing the devil's advocate, but I have to ask, "What are we going to do if we don't get all the customers we expect?"

a dime a dozen - in great surplus
There's no shortage of History teachers now; they're a dime a dozen.

be discombobulated - be confused
The mixup in my class schedules has left me discombobulated.

do a number on - victimize
High interest rates have done a number on prospective home buyers, who have been priced out of the market.

dog days - the hot days of the summer
All I want to do during the dog days is stay indoors and keep out of the sun.

put on the dog - entertain elaborately, often at a higher level than one normally would
Because his boss was coming home for dinner, Bob thought he'd better put on the dog.

put on the dog

doggy bag - bag to bring the uneaten portion of one's meal home from a restaurant
Rather than have the rest of their steaks thrown away, Marsha and Bob asked the waiter for a doggy bag.

donkey work - boring, repetitive work
Once we get the donkey work of adding and subtracting all the figures out of the way, we can get into the interesting stuff.

be down[1] - be depressed

Since getting divorced, Mel has been down almost all the time.

be down[2] - be out of operation, primarily used for computers
The bank's computer is down for routine maintence.

down time - time spent on maintenance
The down time on this photocopy machine is ridiculous; it's out of order almost as much as it works.

down the road - in the future
I have a fair idea of what's going to happen in the next couple of months, but I have no idea of what will happen further down the road.

drag[1] [verb] race cars on city streets
Every Saturday night, the kids drag their cars down Main Street.

drag[2] - boring time
I went to the party last week, but it was a real drag.

draw a blank [from dominoes?] not know or not be able to remember
I know who you mean, but when I try to think of his name, I draw a blank.

draw the line - decide to make no further compromise
I try to be fair, but let's face it, I have to draw the line somewhere.

drek [not polite] poor quality merchandise
Don't buy anything at that store; they only sell drek.

"I'll drink to that!" - I agree with you.

drop in the bucket - an insignificant amount

Considering how much they spend on all their advertising, the money on postage is just a drop in the bucket.

at the drop of a hat - instantly, without advance warning or preparation
Dorothy loves travelling and will fly anywhere at the drop of a hat.

drum up business - look for customers
Times are slow, and we'd better start drumming up some business.

dump on - criticise greatly
It's not my fault we didn't get the job, so don't dump on me.

"The dust hasn't settled" - The situation isn't clear.

(go) **dutch/dutch treat** - pay for one's own portion of a meal
Because this wasn't a business lunch, Bob and I decided to go dutch.

dyed in the wool - strongly believing
He's a dyed in the wool Republican; he wouldn't dream of voting Democratic.

ear mark [from cattle raising] set aside, for a special purpose
This money is earmarked for rent and can't be used for anything else.

eat crow - make a public admission that one has made a bad mistake
They thought we'd fall flat on our faces, and now that we're successful, they have to eat crow.

have egg on one's face - be embarrassed as the result of an error in judgement
I thought that would be a great idea; now that it

flopped, I guess I've got egg on my face.

egg head [not always complementary] intellectual person
I wonder what bright idea the egg heads in the laboratory have come up with now.

put all one's eggs in one basket - place all one's hopes on one thing
I think you should consider some alternatives; it's too risky to put all your eggs in one basket.

ego trip - excessive feeling of self-importance
Ever since he got that tiny promotion, Bob has been on a ego trip and making a general nuisance of himself.

the whole enchilada [emphatic] everything
He doesn't settle for second-best; he wants the whole enchilada.

face the music - accept the blame for something that went wrong
He was caught driving while drunk, and now he's got to face the music.

fake someone out - do something unexpected by someone
Changing our plans so suddenly faked our competitors out; they weren't expecting us to change so radically.

fall flat - fail conspicuously
His plan was too ambitious, and when it was tried, it fell flat.

fall through - be unsuccessful
I was planning on going to Europe this summer, but the trip fell through when I got sick.

far out - Great!
That was a far-out movie, the best one I've seen

this year.

feast or famine - either surplus or shortage
My work is always feast or famine; either I've got too much to do, or I've got time on my hands.

feather bed [verb] require that an employer hire more employees than are really needed
We could do this job with just three people, but union featherbedding makes us hire five.

feather in one cap - source of pride through achievement
Getting a full scholarship to college was quite a feather in his cap.

be fed up - become angry because of bad treatment
That's the last straw! I'm fed up with your constant complaining, and one of us will have to go.

off one's feed - not feeling well
I can't concentrate on work today; I guess I'm off my feed.

feed someone a line - give someone misinformation, often as a joke
They fed me a line about Monday being a holiday, so I took the day off, and it wasn't.

fender bender - minor automobile accident
Traffic was tied up by a series of fender benders on the expressway.

have a field day - publicise a scandal, etc. with delight
When the unpopular politician was caught taking a bribe, the newspapers had a field day writing about it.

finger pointing - placing blame on someone else
When the TV show flopped in mid-season, there was a lot of finger pointing at the network, with

nobody willing to take the blame.

"Fish or cut bait!" [put down] Make a contribution, somehow.
He kept complaining so much, without doing anything to help, that I finally had to tell him to fish or cut bait.

fishy - suspicious
Maybe he's telling the truth, but his story sounds fishy to me.

fishy

fit the bill - be suitable
I've been looking for the right apartment for a long time, and this place just fits the bill - when can I move in?

in fits and starts - making slow progress
Work on the office building has been going in fits and starts.

flake [colloq.] someone who behaves unconventionally [adj., **flaky**]
People who commuted to work on bikes used to be considered flaky by their neighbors.

(put) a flea in one's ear - (make) constant and annoying complaints
If we don't get more heat soon, I'm definitely going to put a flea in the landlord's ear.

flim-flam - trickery
The grocer tried to pull a flim-flam on us by putting the bad tomatoes at the bottom of the bag and hoping we wouldn't notice.

go fly a kite [insult] stop making a nuisance of oneself; leave
If I win the lottery, I'll tell the boss to go fly a kite first thing in the morning.

fly-by-night - a company that is not likely to be in business for long and which probably offers poor quality
There are an awful lot of fly-by-night companies in the house painting business - in business for two months and then they fold.

fly in the ointment - a shortcoming in an otherwise fine solution to a problem
It's a good paying job, but the fly in the ointment is that I'll have to spend a lot of time travelling.

fly off the handle - lose one's temper
Fred has very little patience, and it doesn't take much to make him fly off the handle.

fold - go out of business
With the recession, many small businesses have been folding.

four-letter word - swear word, obscenity
George will have to clean up his act; every other thing he says is a four-letter word.

freebee - something given away for free
As a promotion, the radio station gave away

T-shirts as freebees.

free-lance - working for oneself, as an independent
Most writers work free-lance; they don't work for just one magazine.

freeload - live off someone else's work
"Bob's brother has been freeloading off him for six months; I'm surprised Bob hasn't thrown him out and told him to get a job.

frosting on the cake/icing on the cake - an especially nice, extra benefit
My work calls for me to go to Europe frequently, and as frosting on the cake the company lets my wife go along with me.

full fledged - fully qualified
After so many years of med school, internship, and residency, Don is finally a full-fledged surgeon.

fumble [noun or verb, from football] (make) an awkward mistake in doing something
Because he didn't feel comfortable, Bob fumbled his talk at the meeting.

funky - relaxed and pleasantly unconventional
This restaurant may not look like much, but it has a nice, funky atmosphere.

funny bone [from Latin humerus] arm bone by the elbow
Ouch! I hit my funny bone on the edge of the table.

gang up on - attack a single person in a group
The three teenagers all ganged up on the old woman and stole her handbag.

gatecrash - invite oneself to a party or other function
For obvious reasons, it's not easy to be a

gate-crasher at a White House reception.

get back at - take revenge
He tried to pull a fast one on me, and I'm going to get back at him.

get one's feet wet - make a beginning
I don't know much about computers, but I suppose I've got to get my feet wet sometime.

get even - get revenge
Paul played a trick on Barbara, but she got even with him the next day.

get off on - be extremely interested in
He doesn't like tennis much, but he really gets off on football.

get out from under - escape from a bad situation
Bill got into such a hole with the payments on his house that now that he's lost his job, I don't know how he'll ever get out from under.

get over - recover from
I'm trying to get over a cold.

get the shaft [colloq.] get unexpected, severe injury from somebody, often a supervisor
George felt that he had gotten the shaft when his boss gave a complete outsider the assignment that he had promised him.

get something straight - make sure that one understands
Let me get this straight. You want me to come in Tuesday at 8, not at 9.

ghost of a chance - any chance at all
Although the man's ideas are sound, because he can't express them well, he doesn't have a ghost of a chance of getting them accepted.

give someone a piece of one's mind - tell someone loudly that his/her conduct is completely unacceptable

If Barry borrows my calculator again without asking, I'm going to give him such a piece of my mind that he'll never forget it.

give up the ghost - die (used of machinery)

I had hoped to get another 50,000 miles out of my car, but it gave up the ghost on the expressway and it'd cost too much to fix it.

give something a shot - try something

I've never played golf, but I think I'll give it a shot.

gloss over - try to hide or minimize something unpleasant

While bragging about the effectiveness of the new airplane, the government glossed over the fact that it had a 300% cost overrun.

go back on - break a promise

You promised me you join me on the trip; it's bit late to go back on it now and leave me in the lurch.

go to bat for [from baseball] help

Otto's boss really went to bat for him in getting him the raise he deserved.

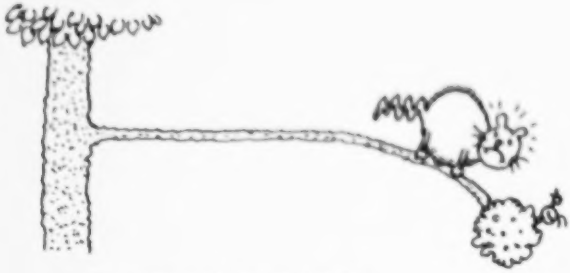
go for broke - make an all-out effort

Because we wanted to get that job, we went for broke and took everybody off of everything else to work on the proposal.

go out on a limb - make a risky statement or decision

I may be going out on a limb, but I think that even though the time is so short we can still get the job ready.

go over like a lead balloon - be completely unsuccessful or unpopular
Right now, the idea of raising taxes to curb inflation would go over like a lead balloon.



go out on a limb

go over something with a fine-tooth comb - examine something very, very carefully
The IRS went over my tax return last year with a fine-tooth comb, but they didn't find anything the matter with it.

go south - run away
The embezzler went south with the company's payroll money.

go to town - publicize a scandal with great delight
When the bribery case came to light, all the papers went to town on it.

go overboard - do too much
Wow! You always have lots of food at your parties, but you really went overboard on this one. You have enough food for an army.

go the way of the wind - disappear without a trace
Their plans went the way of the wind, never to be heard of again.

goof [noun or verb] (make a) mistake
I goofed when I did my tax return, so now I have to do it over.

goof off [noun or verb] be lazy, a lazy person
Phil is a goof-off, and I'm getting tired of carrying him.

(kill) the goose that lays the golden eggs - (overuse or mistreat) something that works well already
We've done very well with this widget so far, but if we try to push it too fast, we're liable to kill the goose that lays the golden eggs.

goosebumps - feel uncomfortable
I get goosebumps when I see a horror movie.

gopher [from "go for"] errand boy
His boy's got a summer job as a gopher in an insurance company - he goes for coffee, he goes for packages, he goes for everything.

grapevine - network of gossip
Say, Mary, I heard through the grapevine that you're getting married soon; is it true?

grass roots - starting spontaneously from individuals in neighborhoods and becoming nationwide through popular support
The environmental movement started largely as a grass roots movement, with people in each community working independently.

graveyard shift - late night shift, usually starting around midnight
Freddy's been working the graveyard shift the past month, so he hasn't been able to see any of his friends who work "normal" hours.

grease one's palm - give a bribe
Unfortunately, you won't get anything done in that office unless you grease someone's palm.

greasy spoon - low quality restaurant
I don't mind eating lunch at a greasy spoon, but for dinner I'd much rather go to a decent restaurant.

gung ho - enthusiastic
It's nice to see someone with a gung ho attitude towards work; I hope she'll be able to keep it up.

gunjy - dirty, messy
Sharon lives in a gunjy apartment in the worst part of town.

hack [verb] solve
This problem's just too hard for me; I just can't hack it.

hack [noun] taxi
Les earns a few extra bucks by driving a hack nights.

let one's hair down - be informal
When Friday comes around, it's time for me to let my hair down and enjoy the weekend.

half-assed [slang] poorly planned
With a half-assed idea like that, how can you expect to succeed?

halfwit - idiot, stupid person
Only a halfwit would believe an excuse like that.

hand-out[1] - money given to a beggar, etc.
If you give that bum a hand-out, he'll just spend it on something to drink.

hand-out[2] - copy of a paper, notes, information leaflet given to people attending a meeting
If we don't pick up a copy of the hand-out, we won't be able to follow what the speaker is talking about.

win **hands down**/beat **hands down** - without difficulty
They're no competition; our team can beat them hands down.

hand over fist - in great amounts, used especially for money
Since getting her law degree, Susan has been making money hand over fist.

"One hand washes the other." "If you help me, I'll help you." [Related: "You scratch my back; I'll scratch yours."]
Critical remark on two people who exchange favors, often at the expense of third parties, frequently the public.

hands on - practical
The technical school offers hands on training with all the most modern equipment.

get the **hang** of - learn how to do
I started sailing last year and now I'm starting to get the hang of it; I haven't tipped the boat over once yet.

hang loose - relax, don't worry
He told me to hang loose because it seems we're going to come out ahead after all.

hang out [verb or noun] meet with friends frequently, usually in a public place; the place
He hangs out a lot with the kids down the street./This bar is a popular student hang out.

"Let it all hang out." "Relax and be casual."

hang tight - hold on and don't worry
If we hang tight, I'm sure we can make it through these bad times.

hang-up [noun] problem
Joe's big hang-up is that he lacks self-confidence.

(get/be) hung up - be delayed
The reason I'm late is that I got hung up in traffic.

hatchet job/hatchet man - stopping a project ruthlessly/a person hired specifically in order to fire other employees
After the hatchet job my boss did on my proposal, I'm not sure how long I want to keep on working here. The owners brought in a hatchet man to fire all the union sympathizers.

have had it - become angry and unwilling to accept fur-ther mistreatment
That's the last straw! I've had it with waiting a half hour for the bus and I'm going to get myself a bicycle.

have someone by the short hairs [vulgar] have somebody in a position where he absolutely must do what you want
Because of our dependence on foreign oil, OPEC's ability to raise prices almost at will has us by the short hairs.

head hunter - a recruiter of professional people
The company president has hired a head hunter to find us a new sales manager.

head to head - in direct competition
Hertz and Avis are head to head competitors in the car rental business.

heads up [from baseball] alert
Because of his heads up attitude, Carl was able to take advantage of the unexpected opportunity.

one's **heart goes out** - one feels sympathy for
My heart goes out to the poor family whose house burned down; I wish I could do something to help them.

hem and haw - talk indirectly about a subject
I wish you'd stop hemming and hawing and tell me what's bothering you instead of making me guess.

high roller [from craps] big spender
Not being a high roller, I can't afford to go to Europe this summer.

hightail [from a deer's tail when running away] leave quickly
Let's hightail it out of here before we miss the start of the movie.

20/20 hindsight - the ability to realize perfectly what mistakes one has made in the past
Obviously, looking at the situation with 20/20 hindsight, I can see where I went wrong, but that doesn't help me now.

20/20 hindsight

hit below the belt [from boxing] attack someone unfairly
Mark feels badly enough about how he botched the job, and it's just hitting below the belt to keep

reminding him of it day after day.

hitch - complication
I'd like to go to Canada for my vacation; the only hitch is finding the time to get away.

(get left) holding the bag - get left with the responsibility for somebody else's problem
I didn't have anything to do with your decision, so don't try to leave me holding the bag.

hold down - keep
Barbara can't hold down a job for longer than two weeks; either she quits or she gets fired.

hold the fort - take care of things while someone is away
While Steve is on vacation, Bob, can you hold the fort?

hold the line - control
Unless we can hold the line on inflation, our standard of living is going to keep on dropping, faster and faster.

hold out [noun or verb] (a person who is) waiting for a better offer
The union is holding out for a better benefit package.

in the hole - short of money/owing money
Having to get my car fixed has left me a couple of hundred bucks in the hole./I'm in the hole to the bank up to the limit.

hook up [noun or verb] connect
He hooked up an extra extension to his telephone./They're taking part in a nationwide television hook up.

get up **on a high horse** - make other people aware of one's position, usually as the result of feeling

lack of adequate respect
Because he thought Fred's comment was tacky, Larry got up on his high horse, announced to everyone that he felt insulted, and left in a huff.

not ... so hot - not good
All of the critics loved that movie, but I didn't think it was so hot.

hot shot - expert, often self-proclaimed
At just 19, he's considered a real hot shot on the stock market; I think he's already made his first million dollars.

hot under the collar - angry
He's very sensitive about people's origins, and ethnic jokes make him hot under the collar.

be **in hot water** - be in trouble
Jim took an extra few days vacation without calling in, and now he's in hot water because he was really needed.

be in hot water

humungous - huge, gigantic
We ordered a humungous sundae at the restaurant; it was big enough for three people.

Irons in the fire - things to do
He has so many irons in the fire that he doesn't have the time to do anything properly.

Jack of all trades - a person able to do many different things adequately, if not well
Bob's a jack of all trades and can handle most of the jobs in the shop.

Jump on the bandwagon - join something that looks to be a winner
Now that people are feeling so strongly about tax reform, it's not surprising that so many politicians have decided to jump on the bandwagon with reform measures of their own.

Jury-rigged [from boating] makeshift, temporary
Because we couldn't get the proper parts we needed in time, we had to jury-rig a replacement.

kick back [noun or verb] payment made by a supplier to a customer's agent as a bribe
The purchasing agent for the Public Works Department was sent to jail for taking kickbacks from contractors.

kick the bucket [slang] die
The gangster kicked the bucket last night; his best friend shot him.

kid stuff - child's play; extremely easy
Theoretical physics was kid stuff to Einstein, but he couldn't figure out his income tax.

throw off kilter - throw out of balance; confuse
Because of illnesses, everybody's work schedule was thrown off kilter.

kiss off [slang] accept as lost
I think it's too early to kiss him off as a client; let me give him another call.

kiss one's tail goodbye - give up hope of safety
When the boss finds out what you've done, you can kiss your tail goodbye; you'll be out the door before you know it.

whole kit and caboodle [somewhat old-fashioned] everything
When they moved into a house trailer, they sold all their furniture - the whole kit and caboodle - and kept only their clothes.

klotz [slang] a clumsy person
That klotz drops everything he touches.

knock off - stop work for the day; reduce in price
It's 5 o'clock; time to knock off. We're knocking off 10% for this special sale.

laid back - relaxed
I enjoy a laid back atmosphere in which I can relax and use my own techniques.

lame brain [insult] stupid person
It's easier to do the work all by myself than to have that lamebrain helping me.

do land-office business - be extremely busy
Ever since they announced the rebate program, we've been doing land-office business.

last ditch stand - final, all-out effort
If we don't make a last ditch stand at winning that contract, we may very well go under.

last straw - final piece of misconduct that can be tolerated
It was bad enough that he usually came to work late, but coming in drunk was the last straw, and I'm going to have to let him go.

lay an egg - flop, fail conspicuously
Although the play was expected to be a hit, it laid

an egg at the box office and had to close after only one week.

lay off - fire because of lack of work
Because of the recession, many workers have had to be laid off.

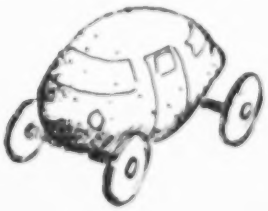
get the lead out - hurry up
If we don't get the lead out, we'll never get to the show on time.

leapfrog - jump over
Although he didn't have much experience, because of his ability he was able to leapfrog over people who had been here much longer.

learn the ropes [from bell ringing] learn how to do something
As this is your first week on the job, Betty will be glad to help you until you learn the ropes.

left-handed compliment - a compliment that isn't really a compliment
The boss paid me a left-handed compliment when he remarked that considering how long I take for lunch, it's incredible how much work I do.

lemon - a completely unsatisfactory product
That new car I bought is a complete lemon; I've had to have it into the garage four times in the last two weeks, and it still doesn't work right.



lemon

let the cat out of the bag - accidentally give away a secret
We were going to give him a surprise party for his birthday, but his wife accidentally let the cat out of the bag.

let down - disappointment
We were looking forward to the picnic, so it was quite a let down when we had to cancel it because of rain.

level with - be honest with
I want to level with you; we haven't been happy with your performance recently.

give something a lick and promise - do something in haste in the hopes of doing it properly later
Because I was in a rush, I had to give cleaning my living room a lick and a promise.

keep the lid on - keep confidential
I don't think we can keep the lid on the scandal much longer; people are bound to find out.

the lion's share - the largest portion
IBM has the lion's share of the large computer market; nobody else even comes close.

lip service - words rather than action
Although they pay lip service to the idea of affirmative action, in reality very few minorities get hired.

live high on the hog - live very well
If I win the lottery, I'll be able to live high on the hog.

lock, stock, and barrel [somewhat old-fashioned, from old guns] completely
When their house burned down, they lost everything they had, lock, stock, and barrel.

lose one's shirt - lose almost everything
He made some bad investments and nearly lost his shirt.

low key - subdued, quiet
They held a very low-key celebration, no loud music or crazy drinking, just a lot of people enjoying each other.

luck out - have good luck
Bob really lucked out, getting exactly the type of job he wanted so quickly.

"Don't get mad - get even." If somebody hurts you, retaliate.

make it/have it made - be successful
Paul really has it made: a good job, a lovely wife, a nice family, the works.

make a killing - get a lot of money through careful buying and selling
Mary bought gold at $40 an ounce, and at its current high price she's certainly made a killing.

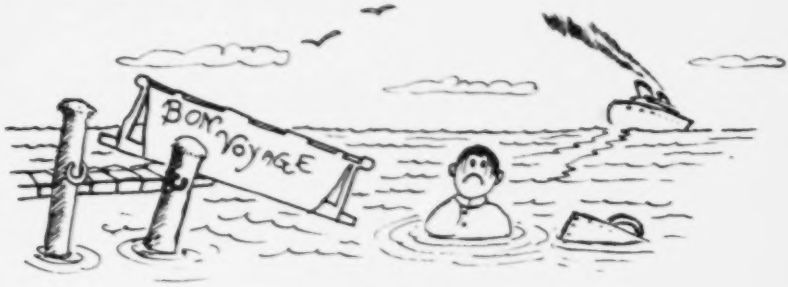
mazel tov [Hebrew] Congratulations
I understand your wife just had a baby boy. Mazel tov!

meat and potatoes - major source of income; favorite type of work
Doing the impossible immediately is our meat and potatoes.

Mickey Mouse - meaningless
You know, I could be doing much more important things than this silly Mickey Mouse assignment.

mind the store - keep track of what's happening
If everybody takes their vacation at the same time, who'll be left to mind the store?

mish mash - confusion
Your term paper was a mish mash of ideas, all thrown together, and that's why I couldn't give you a better grade.



miss the boat

miss the boat - be too late
They took so long in making up their minds about what to do that they missed the boat in their field and could never catch up.

Molotov cocktail - hand bomb made by filling a bottle with gasoline
The rioters threw Molotov cocktails at the police cars.

monkey business - improper conduct
There was some monkey business going on when they were negotiating that last contract, money passed under the table.

mooch - beg, politely
I left my lunch at home; can I mooch part of your sandwich?

moonlight - work at a second job
To make ends meet, Jim moonlights weekends as a bartender.

make a mountain out of a molehill - make a big deal out of something not very important

Look, I'm only a few minutes late; don't make a mountain out of a molehill about it.

nerd [insult] a person lacking a personality
Carl is such a nerd; I hope nobody sees us together.

nitwit - stupid person
That nitwit can't add two figures together and get them right.

no sweat - no problem
We can have that for you by tomorrow; no sweat.

keep one's nose clean - keep out of trouble
If you keep your nose clean here, you can go far; just don't make waves.

nuts and bolts - details
We've got the broad outline settled; now we have to work on the nuts and bolts of the project.

oddball - person who acts strangely
That oddball never does anything right.

odds and ends [from cloth or lumber selling] stray ideas, pieces of wood, etc.
We've covered all the main topics; all that's left are the odds and ends.

off one's rocker/off one's trolley - crazy
For years, people thought the Wright brothers were off their rockers for trying to build a flying machine.

off the wall - bizarre, extremely unusual
Dan's completely off the wall; you can't predict what he's going to do next.

old hat - long since known
That's old hat; people have known that for years.

on the house - free
To celebrate this bar's first anniversary, all the drinks are on the house tonight.

on the rocks

on the rocks [from sailing] in very bad trouble
I hear their marriage is on the rocks and they'll probably file for divorce soon.

on spec - on speculation, in the hopes that someone will buy
Originally, we designed that gadget on spec, and it's been selling very well.

one up on - having special knowledge, ability, etc.

By going to school nights, I'm one up on most of my colleagues.

out in left field [from baseball] doesn't know what's happening
Poor Harry. No matter how hard he tries, he always seems to be out in left field, waiting to be told what to do.

out of it - doesn't know what's happening
Boy, is John out of it! He doesn't have any idea of what's going on.

out of the blue - without warning
We were having a quiet supper when out of the blue my mother announced she was going back to school.

out of one's league [from baseball] above one's level of ability
I can help you with algebra, but I'm afraid that calculus is way out of my league./Sure I'm looking for a new car, but a Rolls Royce is definitely out of my league.

over the hill - escaped, run away
The prisoner went over the hill when the guard wasn't looking.

over the counter drug - non-prescription drug
Aspirin is an over-the-counter medication.

pig out - eat too much
We all pigged out at the company Christmas party, especially on the roast beef.

pinch hit [from baseball] substitute for someone
Paul can't make it to the meeting, so I'm pinch hitting for him.

pick someone's brains - ask someone for his opinions
Jerry, I can't figure out how to do this; mind if

I pick your brains?

(be/get) **pissed off** [slang] (get) extremely angry at
Of course I'm pissed off. You told me my car would be fixed two days ago, and you haven't even started yet.

planned obsolescence - built-in obsolescence
To make sure people would keep buying their cars year after year, the automotive industry has been accused on making cars with planned obsolescence.

play ball - go along with something, often something wrong
If you don't play ball with the mayor, you'll never get a city contract.

play catch-up - try to overtake a leader
Xerox has such a command of the copier market that everybody else has to play catch-up.

play fast and loose - be extremely flexible in interpreting rules and regulations, especially with respect to money
The salesman tried to play fast and loose with his expense account, but got caught.

play by ear

play it by ear [from music] take care of a situation on an ad hoc basis, finding solutions to problems as they arise
Because I don't know what the test will show, I'll have to play the rest of the program by ear.

pull a fast one - try to trick someone
Wendell got that promotion by pulling a fast one on his boss, but he can't last long.

pull someone's leg - tell someone an untrue, but probable story as a joke
Were you just pulling my leg when you said we were all going to get extra bonuses?

pull any punches [from boxing] make mild criticism in order to avoid hurting someone's feelings
Carol won't pull any punches when she critiques your paper; she'll tell you exactly where you're making a mistake.

pussyfoot - make excessively mild criticism
Don't pussyfoot around the issue; do we have a problem, or don't we?

put one's foot in one's mouth - accidentally make an embarrassing comment
Not knowing that Nancy had left him, I put my foot in my mouth when I asked Paul how she was.

quick and dirty - completed without excessive sophistication or polish
Because our time was so limited, we had to do the job quick and dirty.

rain check [from baseball] part of a ticket used to gain readmission to an outdoor game or event which has been cancelled or postponed because of bad weather; a deferred acceptance to an invitation
Because I promised my parents I would visit them on Friday night, I'm afraid I have to take a rain check on visiting you then.

rank and file [from the Army] average worker
Although some of the union leaders wanted a strike, most of the rank and file wanted to continue on the job.

rap session - informal discussion meeting
Every so often, the professor has a rap session with his graduate students, just to see how things are going for them.

read between the lines - find a hidden meaning in a statement
Although he said that everything was all right, if you read between the lines in the way that he said it, you could tell he was really worried.

raw deal - unfair treatment
Sam got a raw deal when he was laid off just before his job would have become permanent.

red herring - information intended to mislead
In order to distract the others, we brought up this irrelevant issue as a red herring.

redneck - blue-collar (manual) worker (not complimentary)
Just because he's a redneck, people who don't know him assume he's very conservative politically.

red tape - bureaucracy
With all the red tape here, it takes forever to get something approved.

ringer [from boxing] an expert who is passed off as a novice
We would have won the softball game, except the other team's pitcher was a ringer who used to play pro.

rip off [noun or verb] steal; cheat
That movie's a rip off, not even worth two bucks, let alone four. Some kids ripped off my stereo last week.

roll off one's back - be ignored
No matter what you say, it'll just roll off his

back. He's immune to criticism.

rotten apple - bad influence
I don't want that rotten apple in my section; he'll set a bad example for everyone else.

rub one's nose in/rub it in [from the way dogs are taught not to make messes] keep reminding someone of something unpleasant
Bill feels bad enough that he lost his job for always coming in late; you don't have to rub his nose in it.

pull the rug out from under - give someone an unpleasant surprise
We were all set to buy a new car when my company pulled the rug out from under us by cancelling the overtime I'd been counting on.

rule of thumb - general guideline
As a rule of thumb, you should plan on one pound of beef for every two guests.

run around - evasions
Whenever I try to find out what happened to my complaint, I get a run around; it's always somebody else's department.

run into the ground - destroy through inattention or carelessness
The company had been doing well, but the most recent management has been running it into the ground and now it's on the verge of bankruptcy.

run of the mill - strictly average, nothing special
This movie is just run of the mill, absolutely undistinguished in every way.

run through [noun or verb] practice
Let's run through this program again so we'll be sure we have it right.

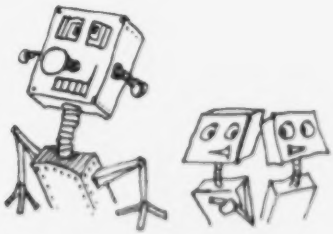
scab labor - non-union labor hired during a strike

The store tried to break the strike through hiring scab labor.

scare up - find
I'm hungry; let's see if I can scare up some breakfast.

from scratch - from the very beginning
Ellen makes all her soups from scratch; they never come from a can.

have a screw loose - be a bit crazy
Normally, Mel's perfectly normal, but sometimes I think he's got a screw loose.



have a screw loose

screwball [insult] a person whose behavior is considered peculiar
Everybody thought he was a screwball, but many of his predictions came true.

second string [from sports] backup; reserve
Our best people were tied up, so we had to use the second string.

sell down the river [from the way unwanted slaves were treated] betray
If Peter thought it would help him any, he'd sell his own mother down the river.

sell like hotcakes - be very popular
The new fuel efficient cars are selling like

hotcakes.

sell out - compromise one's principles for money
Although in his heart he wasn't sure he was doing the right thing, the offer of so much extra money persuaded him to sell out.

sew up - have complete and ready
Once I get the last footnotes down, my term paper'll be all sewn up.

get the shaft - get treated badly
The American public got the shaft when price controls on gas were lifted and prices rose dramatically.

shape up or ship out "do your job right or quit"
When our quality started to slip, we had to tell the inspectors to shape up or ship out.

shell game - trickery
The announced tax cut is just a shell game; what the government gives on the one hand, they'll take back with the other.

give someone the shirt off one's back - be very generous
He's the nicest person I've met in a long time; he'd give you the shirt off his back.

shitload [slang] a lot
There was a shitload of people at the party.

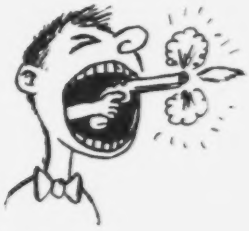
shoestring budget - very small budget
It's incredible how much they're able to accomplish on their shoestring budget.

shoot the breeze - chat, gossip
Around 10:30 we usually take a break and shoot the breeze.

shoot from the hip - act instinctively, without

thinking
When it comes to giving advice, Martin tends to shoot from the hip; fortunately, with his experience, he's usually right.

shoot off one's mouth - say the wrong thing
If he doesn't stop shooting off his mouth, pretty soon he'll find himself out on his ear.



shoot off one's mouth

shoot one's wad [from the military - a wad was a piece of cloth used to keep powder in place in a gun; if you "shot your wad," you couldn't reload the gun] try one's absolute hardest, keeping nothing in reserve (This expression also has a sexual connotation.)
Well, we shot our wad trying to get that job finished; now all we can do is hope that it works right the first time.

be short something - be missing something
I'd like to go to the movies with you, but I'm afraid I'm short the $5.

call the shots [from billiards] make the decisions
Now that he's in power, he's in an excellent position to call the shots.

silver lining - benefit arising from a bad situation
Yes, obviously I was sorry to get laid off, but as

a silver lining I'll have the chance to take long vacation.

sink or swim - learn on the job without special training
Almost by definition, the President has to learn his job by sink or swim.

on the skids - in bad trouble
For a while, Chrysler was on the skids and likely to collapse.

by the skin of one's teeth - with great difficulty
He didn't study all semester and it was only by the skin of his teeth that he was able to pass any of his courses.

"No skin off my nose." It's not my problem, and I don't care one way or another.

slush fund - money put aside for campaign contributions, bribes, etc.
The union had a big slush fund to go to help the candidates it liked.

snowball [verb] increase logarythmically
With word of mouth and a few happy customers, business has started to snowballend now we have almost as much as we can handle.

from soup to nuts - completely
This charter trip contains everything, from soup to nuts, all meals, taxes, tips, even film for your camera.

spin off [noun or verb] an offshoot of one project which becomes a project of its own
Improved medical technology has been one of the spin-offs of the space program.

split - leave
This meeting is boring; let's split and have lunch

early.

split hairs - argue about trivia
I don't feel like splitting hairs; why don't we just agree that both of us were partly wrong and partly right?

on the spur of the moment - spontaneously, without advance planning
I love to travel and would be glad to go to New York on the spur of the moment.

stand someone up - not show up for an appointment
Jim's angry because his date for the movie stood him up and he wasted an hour waiting for her in the rain.

stick it in one's ear [insult] "I disagree with you greatly."
When the boss asked me to work throughout the week-end, I felt strongly like telling him to stick it in his ear.

stick it in one's ear

stick one's neck out - make a comment or decision that may prove costly or unpopular
At the risk of sticking my neck out, I think that if we do that, we're making a big, big mistake.

sticky fingers - willing to steal or take bribes
The politician had sticky fingers, and 5% of every contract ended in his pocket.

stick out like a sore thumb - be very conspicuous
As the only girl on the basketball team, Jane sticks out like a sore thumb.

in the sticks - in the countryside
My parents live in the sticks, but I much prefer life in the city.

stiff someone - not give someone something he/she is entitled to
The cab driver tried to stiff me by not giving me my correct change

stonewall [noun or verb] refuse to answer questions; face an unpleasant inquiry by maintaining complete silence
Nixon tried to stonewall through Watergate by ignoring it, but it didn't wash.

strike up a conversation - start a conversation
I tried to strike up a conversation with a girl in the museum, but she wasn't interested in talking to me.

string someone along - mislead someone, sometimes as a joke
By promising him a raise, which probably won't amount to much, they're just stringing him along.

sucker list - list of people who give to different charities
I think I'm on some kind of sucker list. I've been getting letters from every organization under the sun.

tacky - cheap, not very nice
Helen likes her new dress very much, and you shouldn't make tacky remarks about where you think she got it from.

take after - resemble

In most ways Paul takes after his mother's side of the family, but his eyes are just like his father's.

take a bath - lose a lot of money
When the stock market fell, Cathy took a bath on her investments.

take a dive [from boxing] lose a fight deliberately
Because the boxer didn't show much effort, people were wondering if he hadn't taken a dive.

take for granted - assume as a constant
Don't take your parents for granted until it's too late.

"Take a hike!" [insult] Leave!
The drunk was bothering my girl friend so I told him to take a hike or else I'd call the cops.

be taken in - be tricked
Don't get taken in by their advertising; I don't see how they can sell something like that for that price.

I take it that - I assume that
From the way you talk about your job, I take it that you're about ready to move on.

take the plunge - decide to do something
I've wanted to go into business for myself for a long time, and I guess now is the time to take the plunge.

take someone up on something - accept or agree to something
I have to take a rain check on your invitation this week, but I'd love to take you up on it next week.

talk down to - talk to someone as though he/she were a child

I'm not an idiot, and there's no need to talk down to me.

talk someone into - convince
I was able to talk him into going to the movies with me, and he enjoyed the picture.

talk through one's hat - tell something that's probably not true
Any politician who promises to cut taxes while increasing spending on government programs just has to be talking through his hat.

talk shop/shop talk - talk about business
When I get home from work, I just want to rest; I don't want to talk shop.

tar with the same brush - given the same bad reputation
Although he was an innocent bystander, because he was arrested with the others, he got tarred with the same brush.

to a T - exactly right
That suit fits you to a T.

tee someone off [possibly from golf] make someone angry
He's late again, and it really tees me off. At least he could have phoned.

tell someone off - yell at someone for misbehaving
If he doesn't stop bugging me and get to work, I'm going to tell him off in no uncertain terms.

throw a party - have a party
We're throwing a party next Saturday, and you're invited.

throw in the towel [from boxing] **give up**
I'm exhausted. I'll never get this finished, and I just feel like throwing in the towel.

throw off kilter - throw off balance
We were all thrown off kilter by the boss' surprise announcement.

throw out of whack - damage
I think dropping the typewriter on the floor must have thrown it out of whack.
throw up - vomit
The baby got sick and threw up.

thumbs down - signal of disapproval
I'm sorry to tell you that management gave your proposal the thumbs down.

tickled pink - extremely happy
I was tickled pink when the other guys at work threw me a surprise birthday paty.

be tied up - be busy
I'm afraid I'm going to be tied up for the next two days; give me a call the beginning of next week.

tip off [noun or verb] inform
The police raided the bookie joint after they got a tip off.

tongue in cheek - not seriously, as a joke
He made that comment tongue in cheek, and to his great surprise a lot of people took him seriously.

top banana

top banana/top dog - boss
Paul's the boss and he never lets you forget that he's top banana.

toss up - equal chance
It's a toss up as to who will win; both teams are about the same in quality.

not touch something with a ten-foot pole - avoid completely
That investment is much too risky for me; I wouldn't touch it with a ten-foot pole.

trade off [noun or verb] exchange
Unfortunately, you can't have everything. I think you're going to to have to trade off convenience for price.

trump card [from bridge] winning card
Things may look bad now, but when I play our trump card later, you'll see, we'll come out winners.

turkey [insult] a person whose performance or behavior is substandard or peculiar; a very substandard product
That turkey never does anything right; for that matter, he never does anything./Who on earth would buy a turkey like that? It's the worst thing on the market.

turn in - go to sleep
I'm tired; I guess it's time for me to turn in.

turn someone in - have the police arrest someone
The gangster's girlfriend turned him in to the police.

turn-key - a project that's completely ready to operate, ready for a client to use
We specialize in building turn-key refineries; when we're finished, all you have to do is add electricity and oil.

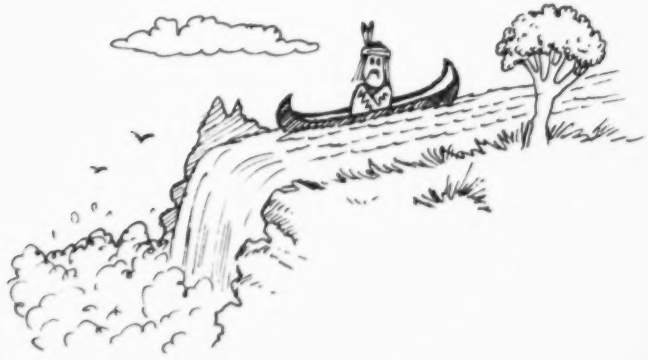
turn over a new leaf - make a new start
Barry used to be a terrible drunk, but it looks like he's turned over a new leaf; he hasn't touched a drink in six months.

turn tail - retreat
My brother had been thinking of buying a house, but turned tail when he figured out his monthly payments.

turn turtle - go bankrupt
Through gross mismanagement, the Penn Central turned turtle.

two cents worth - personal opinion
If you want my two cents worth, I think you're all making a mistake.

up and coming - talented, promising
Bob's an up and coming lawyer, and I'm sure he'll go far.



up the creek without a paddle

up the creek without a paddle - out of luck

Unless I can figure out how to finish my paper by tomorrow noon, I'm going to be up the creek without a paddle.

be up for - be in the mood for
I'm hungry. Are you up for getting a pizza?

be up to - be doing
What is your brother up to these days?

up to par - at an acceptable level
She's been working day and night all week, and by now she's really not feeling up to par.

up to snuff - at an acceptable level
I'm afraid that your recent work isn't up to snuff and you'll have to improve it immediately.

"Up yours!" [insult] "I have a very low opinion of your worth."

vibes - vibrations, feelings
That guy gives out bad vibes, and I don't want to be around him.

war chest - political campaign money
They set up a war chest to defeat the candidate they didn't like.

won't wash - won't be believed
Your explanation won't wash; it's too improbable to be true.

"Don't make waves." Don't cause trouble.

wear (several) **hats** - perform different jobs
Because the store is so small, he has to wear many different hats, from accountant to stockboy.

weasel word - an evasive expression
Tell me straight out what you're trying to say; I don't want any weasel words.

well-to-do - affluent, rich
His family has always been well-to-do and able to afford the good things in life.

white elephant - an unwanted present that is more trouble than it's worth
What should we do with this white elephant your aunt gave us? It's way too ugly to go on the wall.

wild goose chase - a waste of time
We went from store to store looking for that book; it was a real wild goose chase.

wimp - an excessively mild-mannered person
That wimp will let anybody walk all over him.

wind down[1] - come to an stop, like a clock
Since we lost our funding, our project has to wind down early.

wind down[2] - relax
After work, I like to wind down with soft music and a beer.

window dressing - something unnecessary added primarily for appearance
The claim of "community involvement" is just window dressing; City Hall will do what it wants to anyhow.

wing it - play by ear, without advance planning
Since I don't know what questions I'll be asked, I'll have to wing my presentation.

wise guy - trouble-maker
Nobody likes a wise guy.

work flat out - work to the limits of one's ability
Because of the deadline, we all had to work flat out.

out of the woodwork - from nowhere
As soon as they realized the Mayor was on the way down, his critics started coming out of the woodwork.

word of mouth - information passed from one person to another
Although the movie got bad reviews from the critics in the papers, according to word of mouth it's not bad at all.

write one's own ticket - be able to set one's own conditions
If I take that job, I'll be able to write my own ticket: set my own salary, determine how I want to do the work, etc.

put someone through the wringer - give someone an extremely hard time
At his final exam, Bob was really put through the wringer; the test covered everything that was in the course.

write off - consider a complete loss
Because it cost too much to build, we had to write the new product off. Walter stopped coming to these meetings six months ago; obviously, we're going to have to write him off.

"You scratch my back; I'll scratch yours." "If you do a favor for me, I'll do a favor for you."

yoyo [like the children's toy] [insult] a peculiar person or one who does inferior work
Did that yoyo take my calculator again and forget to return it?

zinger - a hidden conclusion or implication, either good or bad
The new job would be very well paid, but the zinger is that you'd have to move to the middle of nowhere.

Common Abbreviations

Not all abbreviations are found in the dictionary. Following is a brief list of a number which are frequently used in speech as well as in writing.

ASAP	As Soon As Possible
BMOC	Big Man On Campus [a student leader]
BYOB	Bring Your Own Beer
BS	Bull Shit
COD	Cash On Delivery
FYI	For Your Information
G and A	General and Administrative [expenses; a company's overhead]
KD	Knocked-Down [in kit form, needing to be put together]
KISS	Keep It Simple, Stupid
KO	Knock-Out [from boxing - to eliminate a competitor]
MYOB	Mind Your Own Business
NIH	Not Invented Here
OJT	On the Job Training
OTC	Over The Counter [drug or stock]
PDQ	Pretty Damn Quickly
PTO	Please Turn Over
Q and A	Question and Answer
RIF	Reduction In Force [layoff of government employees]
RSVP	Please Answer
SOB	Son of a Bitch
SOP	Standard Operating Procedure
TGIF	Thank God It's Friday
TS	Tough Shit
TTFN	Ta Ta For Now [Goodbye]
WASP	White Anglo-Saxon Protestant
YTD	Year to Date

For The Words and Phrases You

Won't Find in the Dictionary

From **absent-minded** to **zinger** ...

Hundreds of the most common idioms and phrases

heard on TV, radio, and the movies,

and used in daily conversation ...

Defined with examples.

Complete with common abbreviations

from **ASAP** to **YTD**

Ed Allan has taught linguistics, English, English as a second/foreign language, and methods for teaching languages in the United States, Ghana, Ethiopia, and Algeria. A graduate of UCLA and the University of London School of Oriental and African Languages, in recent years Dr. Allan has specialized in English for foreign professionals.